

## [Bill Branch]

Wake Forest Cotton Mill

Wake Forest, N. C.

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I. L. M. Ida Moore File

### BILL BRANCH

It was the baffled look in his eyes that I noticed first. He cupped his hand back of his ear as I talked to him and that made his eyes even stranger. He says he worked so long in the cardroom where the drone of wheels beat constantly in his ears that a roaring sound was set up in his head which has not stopped even now when he's out of the mill for good.

He does not want to be out of the mill for good, because he's only twenty-five years old and he has a family of three to support. Of course, if he could get work somewhere else he would prefer that because he believes the mill was fast ruining his health. But in all his life he has known no other work but the cotton mill until last winter when he worked for awhile on the WPA. He is waiting for the day when the WPA will take him on again. Fifteen dollars and a half a month means a lot to a man when he has a wife and two babies looking to him for a living. His mind is bewildered over the working of the unemployment compensation. He speaks of a letter mailed to him from Harry Hopkins in which he is told that he cannot secure work with the WPA until his 2 compensation benefits have been exhausted. For three months he has not had work of any kind. During that time he has received \$22 of unemployment compensation out of his accumulated portion of \$72.94. For seven weeks he has not received a check. He caught a ride into Raleigh the other day and found his way to the Social Security offices. He says the best understanding he

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could get of the matter was that they just hadn't been able to get around to him yet. They promised to see to it that he draws some money soon. Some of the boys who went along with him asked those in charge if they might be allowed to give back to the government their share of the unemployment compensation so there would be one less obstacle blocking them from WPA jobs.

This man whose eyes express the confusion within him is Bill Branch. Bill married Helen Wise three years ago. A few mouths before, his brother, Henry, married Helen's sister, Jane. About two months ago both Helen and Jane had their second babies. They live together now, the eight of them, in a six-room house, and manage to supplement their sacks of relief groceries with a little credit secured at the local store. The relief people come out from Raleigh about once a month and bring groceries which last for a little more than a week. Bill Branch tells you that he appreciates anything they can 3 give him now when he in unable to help himself, but he cannot live always in such a manner. He wants out of life just a chance to make a decent living for himself and family. By that he means: enough food, a few clothes, a house to live in which does not leak, proper medical care, and a dollar or two for amusement now and then. These things which seem simple enough are so far removed from him now that he is doubtful whether he will ever have them. He says he sees nothing in store for him and he feels at twenty-five that the best of his life is over.

The years behind him were not replete with blessings. He was one of six children and his parents were never able to get along. He thinks that if he had attended school regularly he'd be better able to manage today. Once a week when wash day came around he had to stay out to help his mother. There were numerous other occasions when his help at home was required. Those days out of school seemed always to keep him behind his class. He speaks with pride of his wife's diploma. She got it when she finished the seventh grade. She did not stop school until she was ready for the ninth. Bill, trying to make a little joke, says she has more sense than he. Momentarily the confused look leaves his eyes.

I sat for awhile the other day with Bill and Helen in their best room which contains a bed, a cradle, a dresser, two good rockers, and two straight chairs. Helen nursed her fat, two-months old baby whose little body is tanned to a golden brown from the sun baths his mother gives him each day. She wore her dirty pink dress over the domestic gown in which she'd slept the night before. Her two children were dressed in sunsuits freshly ironed that morning.

"These two are all I want," Helen said, nodding her head to include both her children. "It seems to me the world's too full of people already or there wouldn't be so many out of jobs. Big families don't belong in this changing world."

"Helen's right," Bill agreed. "Folks caint half do with big families any more. ( What do you think's goin' to become of all the mill people that the mills don't need no longer?" he asked, and then proceeded to answer his own question. "The way I see it, it looks like some of us that caint get mill work's got to try somethin' new. ) We got to go out and find another life. I wish I could get on one of these resettlement projects they talk about in the papers. I don't know nothin' about farming but I'd be willin' to try."

As he talked he extracted from his pocket a bill fold in which he keeps his Social Security and WPA cards.

Nervously he unfolded it and folded it again. Inside, there was a sailing picture of Franklin Roosevelt. Once Bill Branch looked hard at the picture, and put the bill fold again in his pocket. ( "They's some of us that don't know ways of helpin' our own selves, I reckon," he spoke slowly, searching for words to make me understand the thoughts that tormented him. "And they don't seem to be anybody around here to take any interest in us. That sounds like complaining, don't it, but I don't mean for it to. We just live here, some of us

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half-starvin' and the folks outside don't seem to care. ) They's one man not far from here that takes a interest in us pore class of folks but outside of him I don't know another.

“The man I'm speakin' of is Dr. Timberlake. I belonged to his list before I lost my job but naturally I caint pay nothing now. That don't make no difference with him, and anytime I'd call him, night or day, he'd come right on. When babies are born, that don't go in on the money we pay every week. He never charged but twenty dollars for that last one though and others here in town charge thirty-five. We've never paid the twenty yet, and the other day when I mentioned to him I still didn't have no work he said, 'Don't worry yourself about that bill. Even if you offered to pay me some on it, I wouldn't take the 6 money unless I knowed you had more for food. Yes, I reckon he's the only one about that really likes us as folks.’”

“Does the superintendent try whenever possible to give work to at least one member of a family?” I asked him.

“Well, no'm, not always,” Bill Branch replied, slowly. “He's a young man, likeable enough, but I reckon he ain't never had a day of actual want in his life. He sorter leaves things to the overseers and they take care of they kinfolks first and then they friends. Right down there in that house they's five workin' in the mill. This superintendent ain't been here but two year. He's got to have time like anybody else to study and learn. Maybe things'll be some better when he ketches on. I've went to him a time or two and told him I was a man with a family and I've got to have work. He's polite to me but every time he puts me off.”

“They listened to you one time,” Helen said, smiling a little.

“You mean about covering the house?” Bill asked. Turning to me he explained “We was livin' in two rooms of another house when that first baby was born. ( It was a rainy spell and I aint misrepresentin' none to you when I say the water stood in puddles ankle-deep about her bed. I had out every bucket and pan we owned but they 7 couldn't ketch it all. I looked at Helen and that little baby and I wondered if they could live in such conditions.

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I went for the president of the mill — his office is right up there in the company building — and I 'sisted on him coming to the house. When he got there, he took one look and he said, 'Well, I'll swear.' Then he turned around and left. The carpenters come right away. They covered this house and several more. They was aimin' to cover all on the hill, I reckon, but when the first shift of the cardroom struck over their wages bein' cut from \$14 to \$9 the president stopped the carpenters from work. The rest of the houses aint been covered yet. This one we are in now leaks mighty bad." )

"Your brother doesn't have any sort of work either?" I asked in a little while.

"No'm, nothin' atall. He's in the same fix I am about the WPA. The government's still holding some of his Social Security. Or rather, he's got more to draw that he haven't been able to draw yet. He's not at home now but his wife's in there. She'd be pleased to see you if you care to go in."

I went into the center of the three shabby rooms-in-a-row being used by Jane Branch and her husband. Jane is frailer-looking than Helen and her features are more delicate.

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Jane did not go further than the fourth grade because as the oldest of the Wise children she had to stop school and keep house when her mother went into the mill. At eighteen she married, and for a while both she and her husband worked. Her money went to meet the installments on the three-piece bedroom suite and the kitchen cabinet. Seven dollars of the bill remains to be paid, and she hopes surely the dealer will not take the furniture away from her knowing that she is willing to pay the balance but cannot until her husband gets a job. Did I think they would do such a thing? she wanted to know. She and Henry were getting along well a year ago. Henry was making eleven dollars and she was making nine. They'd saved over a hundred dollars and would have had some money to carry them through the bitter year just past but the oldest child, then a year old, developed a serious illness which almost paralyzed his arm. One doctor said it was infantile paralysis and

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others said it was a strained nerve. Hospital expenses for him reached well beyond their savings.

She worries a great deal over the child's arm though it seems to get a little stronger all the time. Her greatest problem right now is to encourage her husband when there's no hope in her own heart. How they will live through the winter she does not know, but she tries 9 hard to conceal her fear from Henry. He says life is not worth anything to him now because he doesn't feel that he'll ever have a regular job again. Jane wouldn't mind now going to the Relief, but she says it takes so long to get even a little food. It's so hard for her to explain her needs to those in charge that she has stopped altogether asking for clothes for her children. About once a month she, like the other Branches, gets the sack of groceries which lasts about a week. How they shall obtain coal for the winter is a question which gives her much concern. If Henry does get straightened out on his social security and gets on the WPA how can they buy coal if he makes only \$15 a month as he did last winter, she wanted to know.

I left Jane holding her small baby and smiling just a little. In the front room on the other side of the house Bill Branch was still sitting where he was when I left the room. The baffled look was still in his eyes.